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A new joint U.S. Navy and Veterans Administration hospital is being built here, making it the first facility of its kind in the nation, officials announced Monday. The current naval hospital at the Great Lakes Naval Training Center will be torn down and a new \$110 million hospital will be constructed next to the current North Chicago VA Medical Center, which will undergo extensive renovations. The hospitals are now located less than two miles apart. At the new facility, veterans and active duty personnel will share the same doctors, waiting rooms and cafeteria.

"The separation (of the two hospitals) made bureaucratic sense in Washington, but it didn't make sense here where the two institutions are a mile-and-a-half apart," said U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, R-Ill. "The new facility will not be a VA hospital and a Navy hospital next to each other, they will be fully integrated."

The new hospital will open in 2010 and will serve 50,000 veterans and 30,000 active duty recruits, said Kirk, a Navy reservist. Defense Department and Veterans Affairs officials said the joint hospital will save the two departments money and give veterans and sailors better health care services.

"We know at the VA that when these trainees come in they'll eventually be veterans and we want to take care of them," said Veterans Affairs Deputy Secretary Gordon Mansfield. "This is the start of a new era of cooperating between the Department of Defense, especially the Navy, and Veterans Affairs."

A Veterans Affairs study recommended in 1999 the closing of the inpatient facility at the North Chicago VA Medical Center. The study called for sending all needing inpatient care to the Lakeside VA Hospital, located about 35 miles away in downtown Chicago. But VA hospital proponents contended the Chicago facility would become overcrowded and would not be convenient for veterans needing care. "We have come a long way with our vision that veteran health care should be offered where veterans live," Kirk said.

The Navy's mental health unit already has moved to the VA campus, and a \$13 million expansion of the VA hospital's emergency and surgery rooms is expected to be completed in June 2006. All inpatients will move from the Navy hospital to the VA hospital beginning next summer, officials said.

Construction on the new Navy hospital will begin in 2007, and once completed, will offer outpatient services to veterans and active duty recruits and feature a women's health clinic. Lonnie Givens, commander of the North Chicago American Legion, said the new hospital is an honor that gives the area's veterans the respect they deserve.

"I feel proud to be an American and proud to be a veteran, but I'm more proud now that we're finally getting recognized," said Givens, an Army veteran who served in the Vietnam War.

Army veteran and Medal of Honor recipient Allen Lynch, 60, said he looks forward to the day when young Navy sailors and older veterans meet one another while sharing the same hospital waiting rooms and cafeteria.

"This will be a marvelous, wonderful linkage between the kids now serving and the veterans who have served," he said.